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EDUCATION FOR ADULTS THROUGH PUBLIC LECTURES IN NEW YORK CITY

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With the spread of democratic ideas throughout the world the belief in the necessity of the extension of popular education is becoming not alone deeper, but more general. Not only republican America, but monarchical Europe, recognizes the power of public opinion; and this deference to public opinion is the triumph of democracy. How important it is that public opinion should be sound and sane, and that the democracy that exercises this power should wield it in obedience to lofty and pure motives! Hardly more than a century ago education was considered the privilege of the few. How marvelous the development during the past thirty years—the rise and spread of the kindergarten, the increase in the number of secondary schools, the increase in the institutions for the liberal education of women, the state college and university, the spread of the free library; the museum of art and science, all having as their purpose—what? The emancipation of the individual man and the individual woman.

THE WIDER USE OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS, GROUNDS AND EQUIPMENT

In our great cities the extension of the public schools has been evidenced by the addition of the evening schools, both elementary and high, the use of the school houses during the summer for what is known as vacation schools, and the opening of school houses during the evenings throughout the entire year for the purposes of recreation and refined play. Thus the school is becoming not only a place of instruction, but a place of general culture. It becomes, as it should be, a social centre. The extension of the use of the school in the ways I have mentioned provides for those above the school age, and their popular reception is an indication of the wisdom of their adoption.

THE FREE LECTURE SYSTEM IN NEW YORK

The free lecture movement is a provision for adult education that now forms an integral part of the educational system of New York City, and has won its way from small beginnings until it is now regarded by the taxpayer both as a necessity and as one of the most judicious of civic investments. Its success has been genuine, its growth steady. A similar system is possible in each city of the land, so that the lecture system of New York may seem to exemplify the true field of public school extension. *Its underlying principle is that education shall be unending*, that the work of instruction and education begun in the elementary school must be continued and completed. Our country's prosperity and progress depend on the intelligence of its citizens; and, as we have come to realize that the child is of supreme importance, so have we also arrived slowly at the conclusion that he who from necessity has remained in many respects a child in education needs also, and in many instances actually craves, the additional knowledge and education that the "free lectures" attempt to give.

Of the school population of our land but a small percentage attend the high schools and colleges, universities and professional schools. The great body of our citizens has but limited education and the very persons best fitted to profit by education and who need it most are denied its beneficent influence. Those most in need of it are between 14 and 20 years, the time of adolescence, when conscience is disturbed and character is being formed. At that time all the safeguards of true culture must be put around youth.

Then there is a large and growing class of mature people who have a knowledge of practical life and who appreciate the needs of more education most keenly and who long to fill up the gaps in their lives. It is from such a class that the best audiences are gathered. A lecturer on physics testified that "the questions put by hearers were as a rule more intelligent than are asked inside of many a college."

That there is a large body of men and women who believe that they are not too old to learn is proven by the figures of constantly increasing attendance. They come to these lectures not in obedience to the compulsory education act; they do not come "creeping like snail unwillingly to school" but they realize by their

presence the original idea of the school which is a place of recreation and leisure, for the word "school" is from the Greek "Scola" meaning leisure. The people are awakening to the fact that education is a continuous performance; that the school gives the alphabet but that the word must be formed during life. • It is a movement to give men and women whose lives are the lives of monotonous labor a wider outlook and in the most interesting form to bring them into touch with the principles of science and its recent discoveries; with the results of travel; with the teachings of political science and economics; with the lessons of history and the delights afforded by music, literature and art.

MARVELOUS GROWTH IN ATTENDANCE

The free lecture movement was begun in New York in six school houses in the year 1888. It began as a result of the passage by the legislature of the State of New York of an act providing that

The Board of Education is authorized and empowered to provide for the employment of competent lecturers to deliver lectures on the natural sciences and kindred subjects in the public schools of said city in the evenings for the benefit of working men and working women.

The attendance during the first year was about 22,100. This modest beginning was an epochal event, for prior to this time the use of the schools for any purpose other than the usual routine of the elementary day school was undreamed of as the school house was constructed solely for its use by children. Its furniture and equipment were for children only and the school house plant was practically used only five days in the week, five hours each day, for forty weeks in the year. During the year 1915 lectures were given in 176 places to 5,515 audiences with an aggregate attendance of 1,295,907, reaching the population of all the boroughs that compose the City of New York. The attendance was almost entirely of adults, and that fact is one of the most gratifying features of this great lecture system. A well-known journalist wrote to the writer of this article:

The education which a developed man gets and really wants he really uses. If you can get the fathers and mothers of children interested in knowledge they will see to it that their children take an interest. They will inspire their children as a school-teacher cannot do.

THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

And therefore it can be said that the statement of President Eliot that "the fundamental object of democratic education is to lift the whole population to a higher plane of intelligence, right conduct and happiness" is exemplified today by the public lectures in New York which have come to be regarded by many as a "University for the People." It is really a university, although it has no great university buildings, but it has all the elements of the real university that has earnest teachers and willing students. The Superintendent of the Newark Schools, referring to the public lectures, said:

In scarcely another place, except it be the polling place, can men of all classes meet on a common basis of citizenship, and even at the polls men are usually divided into hostile camps. Anything that draws men together on a common footing of rights, powers, duties and enjoyments is a great social and moral power for good citizenship. *Next to the public school which tends to obliterate hereditary and acquired social and class distinctions, the public lecture held in the public school house and paid for out of the public purse is the most thoroughly democratic of our public institutions.*

The character of the lectures and the discrimination of the audiences indicate the serious-minded nature of the men and women who come to the school house. The subjects include all the great themes that are included in the realm of knowledge,—science, art, civics, literature, history and music. Many lectures are given in courses of thirty. Examinations are held, a syllabus is distributed in connection with each course.

Coöperation with the Department of Health is brought about by lectures on sanitation and hygiene. Coöperation with the great museums of art make known to the public the treasures. The development of citizenship has been fostered by the scholarly treatment of the great epochs in our national history. Music, painting and other forms of art have been presented to the people. The purpose is to add to the joy and value of human life by diffusing among the mass of our citizens what someone has well called "race knowledge."

THE CHARACTER AND SCOPE OF LECTURES

There are two classes of lectures, one where subjects that appeal to large audiences can be treated, and the other more special in nature, for those who are interested only in a partic-

ular subject. The entire winter is devoted to but one or two subjects, and a definite course of reading and study accompany the course.

The lectures are illustrated largely by the stereopticon, for as President Eliot has said, "Even Latin and Greek cannot be well taught without the lantern as a means of illustration," and the motion picture forms an additional feature, where advisable. The scientific lectures are accompanied by adequate experiments and the interest in scientific subjects can be shown by the fact that a course of eight lectures on "Heat as a Mode of Motion" in the Great Hall of Cooper Institute attracted an average attendance of about 1,000 at each lecture. The lecture was followed by a class quiz which lasted about an hour and the course was accompanied by a reading of Tyndall's "Heat as a Mode of Motion" as a textbook.

The character of the reading in the public library has much improved as a result of the inquiry for the best books by those who attend the lectures. The continuity of attendance at the lectures in courses is one of the most gratifying signs of the influence of the lecture system and the desire of the people for *systematic instruction*.

PRESIDENT WILSON IN COOPER UNION

The character of the questions put at some of the lectures one can judge from the words of President Wilson in his book "The New Freedom," in which he said:

One of the valuable lessons of my life was due to the fact that at a comparatively early age in my experience I had the privilege of speaking in Cooper Union, New York, and I want to tell you this, that in the questions that were asked there after the speech was over some of the most penetrating questions that I have ever had addressed to me came from some of the men in the audience who were the least well-dressed, came from the plain fellows, came from the fellows whose muscle was daily up against the whole struggle of life. They asked questions which went to the heart of the business and put me to my mettle to answer them. I felt as if those questions came as a voice out of life itself, not a voice out of any school less severe than the severe school of experience.

At some of these discussions in a hall like Cooper Union as many as a thousand persons remain an hour after the lecture to listen and benefit by the open discussion. Discussions of this type have led to the establishment in connection with the lectures of forums where current questions of vital importance are discussed. This use

of the school as a "People's Forum" will, if definitely followed, transform the character of our political meetings; for where better than in the school house shall the people come to reason together? The main questions that are the subject of our political controversies are at bottom educational, and for this reason it is the policy now to educate the people in time of quiet and when reason controls and not confine the campaign of education on economic and political questions to the period immediately prior to an election. It is a perfectly logical step from these weekly discussions on subjects relating to government, given in many cases by city or state officials, to neighborhood meetings to consider local, state and national affairs, and then to have political meetings in these school houses.

The audiences not alone participate in the discussion but participate in suggesting the type of lecture that is desired in any particular neighborhood. In this way a community feeling is developed and men get to know men. As each different locality has some predominating characteristic either in population or in vocation, the special needs of the locality are considered and the lecture meetings become one of the most important socializing influences in a great city and a great counteracting influence to the loneliness which is so apt to prevail. Family life is developed through attendance at the lectures and interest is awakened in thousands who otherwise would lead dull and monotonous lives.

A WIDE RANGE OF SUBJECTS

While practical subjects such as first aid to the injured and hygiene are dwelt upon yet great attention is paid to subjects such as poetry and music, for someone has well said, that if sentiment is eliminated from business transactions, it is of all the more importance that it be added to recreation and leisure. The world never needed poetry so much as now. Charles Eliot Norton once said: "Whatever your occupation may be, and however crowded your hours with other affairs, do not fail to secure a few moments every day for the refreshment of your inner life with a bit of poetry."

One of the most important portions of the population reached by the public lecture system is the Italian and Yiddish immigrant classes who are appealed to by lectures in their own tongues on subjects arranged to prepare them for American life. As an example the titles of a course are given: "We and Our Children,"

“Juvenile Delinquency—Its Prevention,” “Vocational Training,” “Household Economy,” “Citizenship,” etc.

THE NEW TYPE OF SCHOOL HOUSE

The movement for adult education not alone gives a new interpretation to education but calls into being a new type of school house, a school house which is to be adapted not alone to the instruction of children but for the education of men and women, so that there should be in each modern school house a proper auditorium with seats for adults and equipped with apparatus for scientific lectures and with the proper means for illustration. The new school houses built in our city contain such auditoriums and they become social centers, real, genuine, democratic neighborhood houses. Some of these school houses are open on Sunday; if the museum and the library are open on Sunday why should not the school house also be open on Sunday afternoon and in its main hall the people be gathered Sunday afternoon or evening to listen to an uplifting address of a biographical, sociological or ethical character, or to listen to a recital of noble music on the school organ. There are five such organ recitals now being conducted on Sundays in the New York schools.

THE WIDENING OF UNIVERSITY INFLUENCE

Education for adults has brought about the widening of the influence of the university. Of all the classes in a community the most patriotic should be those who have had the benefit of a higher education. Professor Woodbridge says:

To many it appears that the university is an institution primarily engaged in conferring degrees rather than in the great and important business of public instruction; but public instruction is the university's great and important business. Current events perilously invite the university to enter upon its larger opportunity. Amid the wreck of so much civilization, it stands challenged as the one human institution whose professed aim is the substitution of the empire of man over nature through morality and intelligence for the empire of man over man, through politics and force. Especially in a democracy the university should be the source where public opinion is constantly renewed and refreshed, for it is the best means yet devised for the attainment of democracy and civilization. Surely it is not the ideal dream of the visionary, it is not the faint hope of the philosopher, it is the stern truth of history that only the school can save the state!

The university in a great city should be one of the most powerful public service corporations within the state. One of the most distinguished professors in one of our leading universities recently wrote concerning his experience:

It is a genuine pleasure to lecture to New York audiences. I am quite sincere in saying that I lecture to none better or more responsive. Among the impressions that I have had from New York audiences are these: That nothing is too abstract or profound to present to them if it is presented in a fairly attractive and altogether human fashion; that no audiences, university or otherwise, are more accessible to ideas; that discussions need never be run into dogma or partisanship, if the lecturer will take the frank attitude that the lectures are educational, deal with principles, and are not concerned with political controversies. Finally, my faith in democracy has been strengthened and increased by these experiences. We need have no misgivings about the power of the people to think straight when we see these New York audiences.

These words from the professor express the true purpose of the teacher in a scheme for adult education whose purpose is the creation of sound public opinion upon which the future of our democracy rests.

Adult education as interpreted by the public lecture system has broadened the meaning of the term education and formed a continuation school in the best sense. It reaches all classes of society for the audiences are truly democratic. It brings culture in touch with the uncultured, adds to the stock of information of the people and nourishes their ideals. In these days of shorter hours and greater leisure, the toilers will find in adult education the stimulus for the gratification of their intellectual desires, and a larger world is given them in which to live. Their daily labor will be dignified, new joy will come into their lives through association with science, literature and art, and they will discover that true happiness does not come from wealth but from sympathy with the best things in art, science and nature.